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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 000975

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/14/2028

TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL KIRF NP IN CH

SUBJECT: REPORTS OF VIOLENCE, RIOTING IN LHASA, TIBET

REF: BEIJING 973

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey
Carlson. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) ConGen Chengdu and Embassy Beijing have received numerous accounts of serious violence and rioting in Lhasa March 14. The Ambassador raised USG concerns over these reports with Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui on March 14 and urged the Government to exercise restraint (reftel). Riots reportedly started around 12:30 p.m. local time March 14, according to several observers, following several days of tense interaction between protesters and local security forces. The Tibetan quarter around the Jokhang Temple has seen the worst violence, according to foreign contacts in Lhasa. Americans and Europeans in Lhasa have provided numerous accounts of gunshots, overturned cars and burning buildings. Several observers report groups of Tibetans setting fire to Han Chinese-owned businesses. An ABC reporter told us of tanks deployed in front of Potala Palace. One Norwegian tourist described thick black smoke rising above Lhasa to the point of blocking views of the Potala Palace. Another has heard unconfirmed rumors of deaths and injuries, but neither ConGen Chengdu nor Embassy Beijing has confirmed reports of casualties. Most foreigners appear to be taking refuge in hotels. Beijing ACS issued a warden message March 14. We have received no reports of Americans being either injured or arrested. On March 13, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Foreign Affairs Office denied permission for a ConGen Chengdu trip to Lhasa. We will continue to press to visit the TAR.
End Summary.

Ambassador Raises Concern with VFM Zhang Yesui

12. (C) In a March 14 meeting, the Ambassador raised USG concerns over reports of escalating violence in and around Lhasa with Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui (reftel). VFM Zhang blamed the unrest on the "Dalai Lama clique." The Ambassador urged the Chinese government to exercise restraint.

Numerous Amcit and Foreign Accounts of Rioting

13. (C) ConGen Chengdu officers spoke with an Amcit resident of Lhasa (protect) who runs a coffee shop near the Barkhor area of the Tibetan quarter. He said

that he was "locked down" inside the shop with about seven Amcits. He also said that he had been witness to the beginnings of today's incident at about 12:30 p.m. Looking out of an upstairs window near an area known to be about two or three blocks from Jokhang Temple in the center of the city, he saw a mob of about 500-1,000 "Tibetan ly people" form a road block across Beijing Road, one of Lhasa's main avenues. A line of People's Armed Police (PAP) officers formed nearby, the Amcit said, and the Tibetan crowd responded by throwing stones, bricks and other objects, after which the police broke and ran. Later the Amcit witnessed monks and lay people throwing stones and burning cars while police retreated.

Rumors of Deaths, But No Confirmations

¶4. (C) Customers coming into the Amcit's coffee shop have told him that there are "deaths everywhere." Some have told him of Han Chinese being pulled from cars and beaten. One of his Tibetan employees told him that a downtown TV tower had been burned. Others reported Chinese "being taken from homes and shops and killed" -- one employee told him about this happening to his next-door neighbor. According to these Tibetans, rioters are tying white katas (Tibetan greeting scarves) to the doorknobs of Tibetan-owned businesses to spare them from destruction. A vanload of Tibetan policemen came into his shop asking for civilian clothes.

¶5. (C) Another Amcit called Chengdu ACS from Lhasa to say that the military, not police, had fired shots.

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She said there were several Amcits hunkered down with her. An Amcit in Lhasa said that the action was in the center of town, not in East Lhasa. One Amcit told ACS that there are tanks in the street.

Burning of Han Chinese Businesses

¶6. (C) Beijing PolOff spoke with a Norwegian tourist (protect) at the Kyichu Hotel (protect) who said rioting started at approximately 12:30 p.m. local time. The Norwegian said rioters burned Chinese businesses in the immediate vicinity of the hotel (about 7 minutes walk from the Jokhang Temple). He said the Potala Palace (a 20-minute walk from the Kyichu) was invisible from the hotel roof because the "sky is totally black" with smoke. Tibetans, he said, were piling chairs and other items into the streets. The tourist had heard gunfire during the day, but at 5:30 p.m. Beijing time, he said things "calmed down." PolOff spoke with an Australian citizen and U.S. permanent resident, a worker for a U.S.-based health NGO, whose account tracked with that of other foreign observers. The Australian said rioting was occurring around the Jokhang Temple/Tibet quarter. He said he was hunkering down in his room at the Flora Hotel and staff at the Flora had locked all doors and were trying to protect the hotel. Several foreign sources described Lhasa streets as being devoid of cars. One Amcit reported tanks were in the streets, while an ABC reporter claimed tanks were deployed in front of Potala Palace. The coffee shop owner said tear gas was in the air outside his business.

No Reports of Amcit Injuries/Arrests

¶7. (U) Beijing ACS unit issued a warden message March 14 warning Amcits of violence in Lhasa.

¶8. (C) The American coffee shop owner knew of no Amcits having been arrested or injured, or otherwise involved in the violence. Beijing ACS received reports that approximately 25 foreigners were taking refugee in the Yak Hotel (a popular backpacker hotel) but is unable to confirm whether this group includes Americans. German Embassy officer Ingrid Jung (protect) collaborated reports of foreigners at the Yak Hotel, saying the group consisted of mainly Australian and German tourists. Beijing PolOff was unable to get through by phone to the Yak Hotel.

Communications Difficult

¶9. (C) Telephone communications with Lhasa have been very difficult with constant busy signals or dropped lines. ConGenOffs and EmbOffs had somewhat better luck getting through on cellphones.

Account from Economist Reporter

¶10. (C) British Embassy officer Simon Sharpe (protect) has been in contact with an Economist reporter who is on the ground in Lhasa. According to the reporter, whom Sharpe did not name, the center of Lhasa and the downtown area are experiencing "an orgy of violence." The reporter says he has witnessed "Tibetans starting fires and throwing stones on a wide scale." Tibetan attacks, he said, are directed at "everything Chinese" including cars, buildings and people. Today's situation spread so quickly, according to the reporter, that security forces have retreated from the center of the city. When the order comes to reenter the city center they will have to reassert authority, the reporter told Sharpe, adding that "significant use of force is quite likely."

¶11. (C) According to Sharpe, the Chinese Embassy in London contacted the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and volunteered to give a briefing on the Tibet situation at 11:00 a.m. GMT.

Officials Deny ConGen Chengdu Trip Request

¶12. (C) On March 13, the Foreign Affairs Office of the Tibet Autonomous Region denied a request by Chengdu

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and Guangzhou Consuls General to visit the TAR the week of March 17. The explanation given by telephone was that a visit to the TAR by the Guangzhou Consul General "violated international norms" and the FAO was "too busy" to deal with the visit. We will continue to press for permission to visit the TAR.

¶13. (U) This message was coordinated with ConGen Chengdu.

RANDT